

# The Legacy of Nazi Occupation

*Patriotic Memory and National Recovery in  
Western Europe, 1945–1965*

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Pieter Lagrou



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# 1      Appropriating victory and re-establishing the state

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Were the political regimes that followed the downfall of fascism also the product of the struggle against fascism? For the countries that had been fascist it was the inescapable question. The East German regime promoted it insistently; few in West Germany even acknowledged it. Political figures like Willy Brandt – who, as an exile, could invoke with some validity the heritage of opposition to Nazism – were rare, and between the ostracised communists, the naive idealism of the isolated youngsters of the White Rose or the military aristocracy who waited until 20 July 1944 to move against Hitler, the choice of heroic ancestors was problematic. In contrast, the Italian post-war First Republic was very explicitly legitimated as the child of resistance and anti-fascism, and protagonists of the resistance played a prominent role in post-war politics. For both Germanies and for Italy, the post-war state was in any case a completely new start, unrelated to the sinister character of the regime that preceded it. The occupied countries of Western Europe had become part of the fascist order only through military occupation. Domestic fascists, even in France, would never have come to power without the victory of their foreign allies.

For Belgium and the Netherlands, the end of the war logically implied the re-establishment of the pre-war regime, free from the opprobrium of aggressive fascism. At most, the pre-war regime could be held responsible for its innate weakness and for the defeat. During the occupation, the constitutional state had been suspended and replaced by temporary arrangements. The two national administrations continued their activities in a political vacuum, receiving their orders from the occupier, whilst the legitimate government was in exile. Liberation implied the return of the legitimate government and the end of the temporary circumstances of the occupation. For France, the situation was fundamentally different. Pétain's investiture had been a constitutional transition, and the 'French State' he directed from the provincial town of Vichy the creation of a new French regime. Here it was the successor and opponent of the regime that functioned under the occupation that

was 'Provisional', until the restoration of the Republican order: on 2 June 1944, four days before the landing in Normandy, De Gaulle's French Committee for National Liberation changed its name to the 'Provisional Government of the French Republic', a name that it would keep until the first post-war national elections in October 1945. The new regime that followed the end of the war was characterised by a sincere desire to re-establish the Republic: not the Third Republic that had preceded the war and was deemed responsible for the defeat, but a new Fourth Republic that drew part of its legitimacy from the Resistance against Vichy, *l'autorité de fait se disant gouvernement de l'Etat français*.<sup>1</sup> In the Fifth Republic that followed it in 1958, elected by plebiscite and tailored by General De Gaulle, the protagonist of the opposition to Vichy, this reference was strengthened even further.

In spite of this fundamental difference, in all three countries the occupation was only rarely presented as an intermezzo in the national political life, or, when it was, it was strongly polemical in flavour. After the ordeal of war, a mere restoration of the pre-war situation implied a slide back into the old weaknesses, that no lessons had been learned from this terrible experience. Except for Dutch Calvinist conservatives, the word 'restoration' was an implicit criticism of the post-war order. The word 'renewal' legitimised the post-war order: lessons had been learned, pre-war weaknesses overcome. The favourable or unfavourable outcome of the comparison between pre-war and post-war depended on the elimination of a set of negative variables – had the purge of fascists and collaborationists, of 'weak' administrators and traitors, been successful?, had the political divisions and instability of pre-war years been overcome?, had the national defence and security policies learned from the collapse of 1940?, had social injustices been reduced? – and on the integration of one positive variable: the Resistance.

The Resistance was the vigorous element of the Nation's moral health, it was the symbol of rebirth, of the fundamentally new. This role it occupied not only in the political discourse of the post-war years, but to an important degree also in historical and memorialist writing, whether framed in the moral wording of restoration or renewal or the more scholarly vocabulary of continuity and discontinuity. In political history the discussion on continuity or discontinuity has a similarly legitimising function, and in the comparison between pre-war and post-war the Resistance is the good, the patriotic, the unassailable feature. Attributing a significant influence to the Resistance legitimates the post-war order; minimising it criticises this order. Academic tradition has

<sup>1</sup> The standard formulation to indicate Vichy in post-war legal texts.



often attributed great significance to the Resistance in post-war politics, but not surprisingly another critical current proposes that the Resistance had no impact whatsoever on the course of post-war events.<sup>2</sup> 'The Resistance' was credited in Belgium with accomplishing the Social Pact, which fundamentally revised labour relations in what was quite appropriately considered one of the major innovations distinguishing the post-war period from the pre-war era.<sup>3</sup> In the Netherlands, *ontzuiling* (the reduction of religion as the organising principle in politics) was traced back to the transdenominational contacts in the clandestine movement, equally one of the most significant evolutions of Dutch post-war politics.<sup>4</sup> As mentioned above, in France the Fourth and Fifth Republics themselves were, to an important extent, identified as political legacies of the resistance; in the field of finance and economics the major nationalisations in the sectors of banking, insurance, electricity, coal mining and the Renault company were described as implementations of the programme of the Resistance, as was the creation of social security in the social field.<sup>5</sup>

What or who was this 'Resistance' which did all this? When studies of post-war history ascribe such a pervasive impact to the resistance, they rarely define who or what they mean by the term. For the actual war years, however, no subject has been as frequently studied and examined in such detail as the resistance. Several thousand historical studies on the resistance have been published for France alone. The prolific historiographical activity under the common denominator of resistance covers a wide diversity of subjects, movements and individuals. The largest number of publications concerns the 'technical' resistance: armed guerrilla groups, intelligence networks, escape lines for Allied pilots, sabotage teams. Other important forms of resistance covered are the clandestine press, political agitation against the occupier, underground trade union cells, strikes in protest against the occupation, and symbolic manifestations that defied the occupier, such as the commemoration of

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Joost Van Lingen and Niek Slooff, *Van verzetsstrijder tot staatsgevaarlijk burger. Hoe progressieve illegale werkers na de oorlog de voet is dwarsgezet* (Baarn, 1987), and Grégoire Madjarian, *Conflits, pouvoirs et société à la Libération* (Paris, 1980).

<sup>3</sup> See Dirk Luyten and Guy Vantemsche (eds.), *Het Sociaal pact van 1944. Oorsprong, betekenis en gevolgen* (Brussels, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> For an effective criticism, see Coen Hilbrink, *De illegalen, Illegaliteit in Twente en het aangrenzende Salland, 1940–1945* (Oldenzaal, 1989).

<sup>5</sup> See Claire Andrieu, *Le Programme Commun de la Résistance. Des idées dans la guerre* (Paris, 1984); Charles-Louis Foulon, *Le Pouvoir en province à la libération. Les Commissaires de la République, 1943–1946*, Travaux et Recherches de Science Politique 32 (Paris, 1975); Hilary Footitt and John Simmonds, *France 1943–1945* (Leicester, 1988); and Andrew Shennan, *Rethinking France. Plans for Renewal 1940–1946* (Oxford, 1989).

11 November. Still another category deals with individual acts of resistance such as hiding Jews or refusal to work for German industry. A last group of studies defines resistance as an opinion – notably the whole literature on the resistance of the churches during the occupation.

According to the definition of resistance, each group of studies covers a very different historical reality and a distinct social body. Attempts to identify and quantify the resistance sociologically lead to the most divergent conclusions. Yet there is virtual consensus on one point: the numbers involved in the resistance were very small compared to the total population. This makes it all the more difficult to understand how a small group of people could have had such a formative influence on post-war history. The implicit and imprecise use of the term 'resistance' in many all-embracing theories about continuity and change in post-war societies is a side effect of the legitimising, even ideological, character of the discussion. If 'resistance' ends up meaning everything from a tightly organised sabotage team to the attitude of the Catholic church in the last years of the occupation, it is not used as a description of a concrete historical event or a clear-cut sociological body, but as a value judgement. Resistance then indicates a praiseworthy attitude, the opposite of collaboration or betrayal. Resistance as a key to the appreciation of the post-war evolution is not a workable terminology. How can one measure the impact of a category for which no one can agree on who is included and who is excluded? A historiographical tradition based on this vague and normative terminology is inert for factual criticism. An uncritical acceptance of whatever a certain tradition defines as 'resistance' becomes deeply equivocal when implicated in a comparison.<sup>6</sup>

Each author can, of course, establish his or her own definition, to clarify what he or she intends to study. Jean-Pierre Azéma and François Bédarida, for example, propose as a general definition 'the clandestine action, undertaken in the name of the freedom of the nation and the dignity of the human person, by volunteers organising the struggle against the domination (and most often the occupation) of their country by a Nazi, fascist, satellite or Allied regime'.<sup>7</sup> This definition imposes a permanent value judgement on the historian. Few collaborationists would have denied that they were struggling for the freedom of the nation and the dignity of the human person. The Second World War in

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Bob De Graaff, 'Collaboratie en Verzet. Een vergelijkend perspectief', in *Vijftig jaar na de inval* (Amsterdam, 1985), pp. 95–108. De Graaff distinguishes different definitions of resistance but makes a most uncritical use of statistics on resistance fighters: 400,000 for France, 70,000 in Belgium and 25,000 in the Netherlands.

<sup>7</sup> Azéma and Bédarida, 'L'Historisation de la Résistance', *Esprit* 198 (Jan. 1994), pp. 22–3.

general, and the German occupation of Western Europe in particular, indeed faced each individual with a moral conflict, and the choices made by individuals and groups were first and foremost concerned with values that a historian cannot ignore. But the attempts at a general and universally applicable definition of resistance as a tool for the social historian, a definition that would allow us to distinguish the group of resistance veterans as clearly as we can distinguish former labour conscripts or former victims of persecution, are doomed to failure. Moreover, no single definition would cover the present object of study: the legacy of the resistance, that is, the role in post-war society of whoever was considered or claimed to be considered as such.

For the purpose of this study, I will not initially establish our definition of resistance in order to measure subsequently its influence on post-war society, but limit myself to a description of the lively debate on this definition during the post-war years, and through this debate try to assess the role of resistance in post-war society. The most striking characteristic of the post-war vocabulary is precisely the qualification of the term 'resister' by the addition of 'real', 'authenticated', 'bona fide' or the equally frequent terminology of 'the resisters of September [1944]' or of May (1945), the 'false', the 'so-called' resisters. Could 'the resistance' in the weeks following the liberation easily be identified as the groups of armed citizens that suddenly surfaced from a secret existence? Almost immediately, discussion sprang up: whether all of them had really been resisters during the war and whether they were the only ones with the distinction of having resisted the occupier. The definition of what and who had been elements of the resistance, accommodation or collaboration became one of the most vehemently debated political issues of the post-war years until approximately the early 1950s, and continuing less intensively to the present day.

The polemics concerning the war record of political parties and the endless quarrels about decorations, titles and official histories are at first sight amongst the most easily outdated anecdotes of post-war history. Yet they reflect a profound conflict in post-war politics. The brutal suspension of normal political life during the occupation left the occupied populations disoriented, bereft of their habitual structures and references. The future had become uncertain, even the future of the nation as such. After the war came the settling of scores – between those who had betrayed the nation and those whose national loyalty and combativeness had never faltered at the extremes, and, less often mentioned though politically far more relevant, in the nuances of attitudes at the centre – *attentistes* and lukewarm resisters, compromised and not so compromised politicians and political families, converts of more and

very recent date. In 1944, what was at stake in this settling of scores was not so much the past as the future. The attitude during the war had to provide legitimisation over who – amongst individuals, and social and political groups – was qualified to take the lead in the national reconstruction. The German withdrawal left a political vacuum, and for the immediate post-war years the crucial political issue was who would fill the gap, occupy the centre stage of the political scene. The immediate power aspirations of resistance movements were quickly settled. The success of resistance parties was very short-lived, and those resistance figures who rose to some political prominence did so only in so far as they rallied behind a traditional political party.

As a theme in the post-war political discourse, however, the notion of resistance was the point of reference, the norm against which to measure patriotic veracity and political merit. To a large extent, in post-war politics too, the notion of ‘resistance’ led a life independent and deliberately disconnected from its sociological body. The difference between the sociological reality of the resistance and its metaphorical political meaning lay in mythologising the national narrative of the traumatic experience of the Second World War. The urge for legitimisation amongst individuals and groups was mirrored at the national level by the urge for entire countries to identify with the resistance as a means of legitimising their role in post-war international politics. Resistance was crucial to the formation of a national epic. ‘Being liberated’ was too passive a mode to celebrate the recovery of national independence, and gratitude is a weak basis for national identity. For the three countries concerned, glorification of the contribution of the resistance movements was the only basis available for a true national myth.

France, the Netherlands and Belgium are indisputably the posers of 1940.<sup>8</sup> For France, triumphant in 1918, the unprecedented defeat demolished its status as Great Nation and Empire and plunged the country into a profound national crisis. It had taken the German invader six weeks and 100,000 casualties to impose the armistice on 22 June 1940. In the Netherlands, defeat was equally unprecedented. The country had not been occupied, or involved in any major war, since Napoleonic times. Yet military defeat, imposed by the German army in barely five days, was experienced rather as a moral outrage than as a national humiliation. In Belgium the invasion of 1940 was seen as a

<sup>8</sup> Useful entries into the vast fields of the historiography of the war years are, for France, Jean-Pierre Azéma, *De Munich à la Libération, 1938–1944* (Paris, 1979); for Belgium, Etienne Verhoeyen, *La Belgique Occupée. De l’an ’40 à la libération* (Brussels, 1994); and, for the Netherlands, Louis De Jong, *Het Koninkrijk de Nederlanden in de Tweede Wereldoorlog* (The Hague, 1969–91), 14 vols.

repetition of the 1914 scenario, for better – belief in the possibility of national resistance and resurrection, even with most of the country occupied – and for worse – the civil population fled the country in massive numbers, fearing a repetition of the atrocities of 1914. Eighteen days after the attack of 10 May, King Leopold III, supreme commander of the armed forces, capitulated to spare his army further useless bloodshed.

Of course, in 1940 the military success of Nazi Germany was not perceived as the prelude to the final defeat which in 1945 it would prove to have been. This perspective required a visionary capacity, or, in contemporary terms, a cruel lack of realism. Accordingly, political evaluation of the events of 1940 recommended resignation first of all. In France the impact of the collapse of 1940 meant that no single pre-war political force – government, parliament, political parties – refused to accept the defeat. In co-operation with Nazi Germany, the Vichy regime continued to exert politically legitimate power. The defeat was evaluated – not only by the regime itself – as the inevitable consequence of national weakness and political chaos during the pre-war years, to be remedied only through acceptance of an unavoidable German domination and a profound reconstruction of the French Nation. In the Netherlands queen and government stayed in the war at the side of the British, more for reasons of timing and coincidence than out of conviction or confidence in the national future. When the queen and her cabinet fled to London to escape German bombing, the war on the western front was far from over. After a few months, the prime minister of the government-in-exile left London to return to the Netherlands and work towards a peace settlement with Germany. In the occupied country a new political movement animated by notorious pre-war politicians, the Dutch Union (*Nederlandse Unie*), gathered mass support behind a programme of loyal acceptance of the occupation. In Belgium King Leopold III decided to surrender and stay in the occupied country. He envisaged a political future not unlike Pétain's role in France under German acquiescence. His ambitions were never realised only because of a lack of approval by Hitler. The Belgian government had fled to France in the hope of continuing the war; after the French defeat, it fell into despair and tried to organise its return to the occupied country. Coincidence again, and the personal conviction of a single minister, led the government finally to London and the Allied camp. Popular support during these months was on the king's side and the government was largely repudiated.

The Allies supported the cause of the exiled representatives of the occupied countries of Europe neither for what they represented in terms

of popular allegiance in their own countries, nor for the contribution to the war effort which these exiles could scarcely deliver, but for the legitimisation of a broad Allied front. This front consisted partly of governments with no pre-war past – first and foremost General De Gaulle and his Free French – and partly of governments with no post-war future, such as the Polish government-in-exile or the Yugoslav king and his government. The legitimacy of the Dutch representation was strong: the head of state and her executive were united in exile. The Belgian representation was constitutionally weaker: the executive broke away from the head of state. The legitimacy of De Gaulle was entirely problematic and indeed unacceptable to the United States until the very last phase of the liberation of France.

In the course of the war it was not only military fortunes that changed. The national destiny of the occupied countries was affected most deeply by the changing nature of the occupation itself. Economic pillage, forced labour and persecution withdrew legitimacy from political forces that collaborated with the Nazi regime and shifted popular allegiance. To military defeat was added the suspension of the rule of law, shortages of food, clothing and fuel, massive deportations and the assassination on an unprecedented scale of political opponents and Jews. The delegitimisation of the foreign occupier and his domestic accomplices did not reduce the national humiliation of military defeat – on the contrary, it intensified the national crisis. The integrity of the national territory, the rule of law and democracy proved defenceless in the face of foreign occupation and domestic treason. This disintegration crowned the process of decay observed by many during the 1930s.

The visionary capacity to believe, in 1940, in the possible defeat of Nazi Germany was not exclusive to the enlightened few or those thrown on the British shores by the hazards of history. In the occupied countries, despite the crushing supremacy of Nazi strength, individuals refused to accept defeat and organised forms of resistance. They often worked in complete isolation, and at first their means of action were limited and symbolic in nature. As the chances of war and the nature of the occupation changed, resistance increased. Opposition was organised along political lines, with a clandestine press as the main means of action, or took the form of economic obstruction with strikes and sabotage. Towards the end of the occupation, these widespread forms of resistance were in line with the opinions of the majority of the public, resentful of the occupation and of collaboration, and awaiting Allied liberation. In France, from the spring of 1943 onwards, the National Resistance Council (CNR, Conseil National de la Résistance) formulated a political alternative to the Vichy regime, based on a broad

assemblage of political forces. The Dutch National Resistance Council (GAC, Grote Adviescommissie der Illegaliteit), starting its activities in the summer of 1944, prepared actively for political take-over after the belated liberation, involving all representative social and political organisations. Only Belgium had no such formal body; Belgian society was deeply divided, not least over the royal question. Further, the absence of a Vichy-style domestic political regime crystallising internal opposition prevented the replication of the French scenario. The *Blitzkrieg* liberation, leaving no time for extensive political negotiations, cut short the process of integration which developed in the Netherlands in the following months.

With the exception of isolated areas in France, armed insurrection was rare, and violent action took the form of precisely targeted guerrilla attacks on German or, more frequently, collaborationist personnel and infrastructure. The resistance activities most relevant from the military point of view, intelligence supplied to the Allied services, involved only small specialist cells. Large-scale military involvement of resisters from the 'internal front' was carefully prepared, but started only with the arrival of the Allied troops, when it performed a secondary and supportive role. Though often useful, the 'internal front' was not a decisive factor in the military outcome of the Second World War. Faced with relentless persecution and organised on a spontaneous basis outside the traditional social and political networks, armed resistance required exceptional courage and therefore attracted people with an unconventional profile, inclined to radical high-risk activity. This type of resistance was inevitably the work of a radicalised minority. The national political resistance bodies, involving conventional political forces and striving for representativeness, were first of all concerned with the future reconstruction of their national political life; the fight against the occupier took a much lower priority.

In 1940, the defeat was undeniably a national defeat: more imagination was required to turn the Allied victory of 1945 into a national victory. In 1944 and 1945, the exiled governments chosen as partners by the Allies shared with the resistance forces in the generous vision of a collective victory offered by the Anglo-Saxon liberators. The Dutch queen, whose return to the Netherlands with her government coincided with the German surrender, was the unquestioned champion of the struggle for national liberation. So too, as a *deus ex machina*, was General De Gaulle. France owed its status as an Allied power to his stubbornness and poker-player's bluffing ability. The heroic stature of the Belgian government-in-exile was more open to question. In any case, the nationalisation of the victory required more than the presence,

in the Allied centres of decision-making, of the nation's representatives in exile; De Gaulle's *français libres* and their African exploits, the few hundred soldiers of Belgium's Brigade Piron in the British ranks or the Dutch Internal Armed Forces, constituted in the liberated south in September 1944, were all too peripheral to the decisive military events, and to the experience of the occupation in the country, to act as properly national heroes, even though the Allies granted them, as for example in Paris in August 1944, a disproportionately glorious part in the final act.

Resistance in all its forms was the only possibility for a nationalisation of victory and liberation. The identification of National and Resistance had a pressing urgency about it in the first months after the liberation. Governments had to affirm their legitimacy in the face of organised groups of armed citizens and re-establish public order and the constitutional state.

It was undoubtedly in France that this identification mattered most to the protagonists of the months following the liberation. De Gaulle had led a long struggle to impose his legitimacy throughout the empire and facing the Allies, and through his emissary Jean Moulin had established a connection between his *Résistance extérieure* and the *résistance intérieure* in the country. He achieved acceptance of his leadership in the CNR. Yet this formal acceptance was far from a warrant for an agreed and planned political take-over after the liberation.<sup>9</sup> As a true counterstate to Vichy, the CNR had developed a plan for national insurrection, with a parallel structure of departmental liberation committees assuming political responsibilities. Military events made this impossible, but the liberation committees claimed political representativeness until the first post-war elections, and the CNR rhetorically (but only rhetorically) claimed to incarnate the French Republic no less than the provisional government. The second part of the CNR's programme concerned its political platform for the post-war years, some sort of counter-*Révolution Nationale*. The programme pleaded for thorough social and economical changes, in particular the nationalisation of major sectors of economic life. As Claire Andrieu candidly describes, the programme had only limited circulation during the occupation and drew most attention and consensus in the first months of 1945, when the three major national parties – the PCF, the Socialist SFIO and the Christian Democrat MRP – proclaimed their public adherence. Through the major nationalisations of the autumn of 1945, De Gaulle's government, in which the three parties participated, could claim to have implemented the CNR's

<sup>9</sup> Philippe Buton, 'L'Etat restauré', in Jean-Pierre Azéma and François Bédarida (eds.), *La France des années noires* (Paris, 1993), vol. II, pp. 405–28; Philippe Buton and Jean-Marie Guillon (eds.), *Les Pouvoirs en France à la libération* (Paris, 1994).



programme at least partially. In post-war French politics, the Conseil National de la Résistance represented a historical reference, for the parties and for government. The unanimous front united against Vichy dissolved as soon as Vichy disappeared, and with the re-establishment of republican legitimacy the CNR had in fact realised its main objective.

De Gaulle's first political acts demonstrated precisely his central concern to re-establish the republican legitimacy, rather than a revolutionary seizure of power. The general declared that the republic had never ceased to exist and that he, as its incarnation, was the only legitimate head of government. As soon as Paris was liberated, De Gaulle publicly identified the whole Nation with the Resistance: Paris liberated itself, sustained by *la France toute entière*. In the first 'government of national unity' under his guidance, members of the Conseil National de la Résistance were incorporated in the enlarged consultative assembly as a sign of recognition. The seizure of power in the centre of the country did not bring immediate control over the periphery, however, where De Gaulle's regional commissioners faced the long and difficult task of establishing republican legitimacy in the face of firmly autonomous liberation committees stemming from the resistance, particularly in the south-west of the country. Even before the end of the war, at the end of April 1945, local elections re-established political representation at the municipal level, followed by national elections at the end of October. The formation of the new French army and its contribution to the final offensive created open opposition between the former leader of the external resistance and the internal resistance. The fighting formations of the FFI (Forces Françaises de l'Intérieur) were dissolved and more than 200,000 of its members enrolled in the army, under the command of regular officers.<sup>10</sup> The Milices Patriotiques, incorporating many last-minute volunteers and officially dissolved on 28 October 1944, would finally be disbanded only in January 1945 after the intervention of the communist leader Maurice Thorez on his return from Moscow. By the end of the European war, the French army consisted of 1,300,000 men, mostly regular draftees, containing resistance involvement in a new republican army and establishing the French contribution to the occupation of Germany.

Belgium presented a different picture. Most of the country was liberated in a matter of days and the government of national unity, formed three weeks later, included communist and resistance ministers in the government team newly returned from London. The symbiosis of traditional forces in Belgian politics, incarnated in the London

<sup>10</sup> For the modalities of this integration, see AN F60 374.

government, and the new radicalism of the resistance was short-lived.<sup>11</sup> Insurmountable mutual distrust, deep political divisions in Belgian society and a particular lack of political skill and national stature on both sides led to an open and occasionally even violent conflict over disarming the resistance and integrating it into the regular army. The resistance fighters were gathered in camps, fed and armed, but the government refused to use the resistance troops in the war. This, according to the government, would undermine the stability of the country in the long run, as the resistance movements would establish themselves as private militias. The transition from the clandestine struggle to a new national army was a complete failure. By the end of the Battle of the Bulge, Belgian troops numbered barely 11,000, and by the end of the European war no more than 53,000, only half of them with a resistance background, more particularly from the military nationalist formations. By November 1944, more than two months after the liberation, the government had decided that resistance fighters could enter the army only on an individual basis (as happened earlier in Italy) and, more significantly, that all their arms must be handed in within the next fourteen days, on sanction of arrest. The communist ministers resigned from government and on 25 November 1944 a protest demonstration by the resistance in the streets of Brussels degenerated into a shoot-out. When the crowd headed for the neutral zone round the parliament, the police opened fire on the demonstration and injured forty-five members of the resistance. Only the visible presence of British armoured vehicles in the adjacent streets prevented an escalation. The incidents surrounding the disarming of the resistance inspired a violent speech by Winston Churchill on the situation in Belgium, ostensibly revealing an attempted coup by communist resistance forces. The British historian Geoffrey Warner has since demonstrated that the so-called *coup d'état* was a fabrication, designed mainly as a defence against House of Commons criticism of the British government's support for conservative forces in Greece, Italy and Belgium, but Churchill's rhetorical violence had lasting significance in representations of the Belgian resistance, both abroad and in Belgian historiography.

If there was an erratic political consensus in Belgian politics in the months between the liberation and the end of the war, this was not based on a shared identification with the resistance, but rather on the

<sup>11</sup> See José Gotovitch, *Du Rouge au tricolore. Résistance et Parti Communiste* (Brussels, 1992), pp. 367–441; Pieter Lagrou, 'US Politics of Stabilization in Liberated Europe. The View from the American Embassy in Brussels, 1944–1946', *European History Quarterly* 25 (1995), pp. 209–46; and Geoffrey Warner, 'La Crise Politique Belge de novembre 1944. Un coup d'état manqué?', *Courrier Hebdomadaire de CRISP* 797 (1978), pp. 1–26.

shared absence of any reference to the central divisive element, King Leopold III. As soon as this tacit consensus was lifted by the liberation of the king in Austria, the national coalition fell apart. The Catholic royalists, who defended both the unconditional return of the king and the more compromising attitude of the war years, including leniency in the purge of collaborationists, were forced into opposition. The anti-royalist coalition of socialists, liberals and communists operated an alternative identification with the resistance, not with the aim of a national reconciliation, but in a dialectical logic of polarisation against king, compromise and Catholic opposition. King and resistance were central to the first post-war election in Belgium in February 1946: the latter gathered more support, albeit with only a narrow margin. The Belgian royal question would finally be resolved more than five years after the end of the war. Even though the Catholics formed a coalition government with the socialists in March 1947, after the departure of the Communist Party, the regency by the king's brother Charles was maintained until the summer of 1950. In March of that year, a new Catholic-Liberal coalition government held a referendum on the eventual return of the king in which an overall majority voted in favour of the king, but only a marked minority of French speakers. A homogeneously Catholic cabinet then accepted political responsibility for the king's return in July 1950, but after a week of violent confrontations and rampant civil war tensions, Leopold finally resigned in favour of his son Baudouin.

In the Netherlands, the post-war political situation was determined by its peculiar chronology.<sup>12</sup> Unlike France and especially Belgium, the Netherlands did not benefit from a lightning liberation. The failure of the assault on the Rhine in October 1944 cut the Dutch territory in two very unequal halves. The liberated south was administered by a Military Authority whilst the north, east and centre of the country continued to be occupied until the German surrender in May 1945. The south became a hotbed of political conflicts, with the London government opposing the queen, the Military Authority and the local resistance movements. The occupied part of the country was particularly cut off during the harsh winter of 1944–5. Famine and flooding, strikes and destruction of the infrastructure left it in chaos and destitution. Partly because of this state of disorganisation, the first national elections were not held until May 1946, one year after the German surrender and more than twenty months after the liberation of the south (the previous national elections dated from 1937, almost a decade earlier). Local elections followed another two months later. Yet despite the absence of

<sup>12</sup> De Jong, *Koninkrijk*, vol. Xa; F. Duynstee and J. Bosmans, *Het kabinet Schermerhorn-Drees, 1945–1946* (Assen and Amsterdam, 1977).

## FEEST TE SINT-GILLIS



— Leopold komt terug : wij zijn gered !...

1 Celebration at St Gillis Prison. Collaborationists exclaim: 'Leopold is coming back we're saved!' From *Front*, 1 July 1945. Photo, Isabelle Sampieri, CEGES/SOMA.

elections and the division of the national territory, the political legitimacy of the executive was questioned less in the Netherlands than in its southern neighbours. The conflicts that had opposed government, queen and local forces in the months leading up to May 1945 disappeared once the new cabinet was formed after the liberation of the entire territory. The queen was acclaimed and acted as the embodiment of national ardour, and the new government, incorporating political figures of the clandestine home front, achieved a remarkable entente with the urban resistance elites. The national council of the resistance movements was its chief ally in the normalisation of political life.<sup>13</sup> The end

<sup>13</sup> Pieter Lagrou, 'Patriotten en Regenten. Het parochiale patriottisme van de na-oorlogse Nederlandse illegaliteit, 1945–1980', in *Oorlogsdocumentatie '40–'45* 6 (Amsterdam, 1995), pp. 10–47; H. W. Sandberg, *Witboek over de geschiedenis van het georganiseerde verzet voor en na de bevrijding* (Amsterdam, 1950).

of hostilities in Europe had removed all justification for continuing resistance activism, and opposition from rank-and-file resisters to the re-establishment of local administration was quickly marginalised.

In continental Europe, France, Belgium and the Netherlands, together with Denmark and Norway, were successful examples of the re-establishment of democracy and political stability, France with a new constitution, Belgium with a new head of state after six years of 'the royal question'. The occupation had not disturbed the foundations of the occupied societies, nor removed all legitimacy from their institutions. Resistance had proved the endurance and the popularity of these foundations, rather than fostering an alternative political order ready to take over as soon as the enemy had left. Of course, the rapid normalisation of political life in the months following the liberation required the resistance to rein in some of their ambitions. Democracy being a matter of the majority, how could a tiny minority returning from exile, or the more substantial minority involved in the radical choice of resistance, establish legitimacy and allegiance without dramatically broadening its basis? The failure of new resistance parties in all three countries in the course of the first post-war year illustrates this eloquently.<sup>14</sup> After the initial, and often in different degrees discordant, confrontation between the heroic legitimacy of the resistance and the political legitimacy of a majority, a policy of memory gradually reshaped historical interpretation of the occupation and integrated resistance and the nation. The overwhelming majority of the population underwent the occupation and, at many levels, were forced to make concessions and compromises. This was particularly true for the state apparatus working under German supervision in Belgium, and the Netherlands, and in France under French collaborationist supervision in the southern part of the country prior to November 1942 even in the absence of German troops. Furthermore, an important minority had been 'displaced' to Germany, as prisoners of war, deported workers, concentration camp inmates or racial minorities destined for annihilation: they too had to be reintegrated into the national community by way of the national epic. This national epic, the reconstruction of a national identity, was necessarily concomitant with the process of material reconstruction and political reaffirmation.

How did the assimilation of resistance and nation function and, first

<sup>14</sup> For France, see Jean-Marie Guillon, 'Parti du mouvement et Parti de l'ordre (automne 1944–automne 1945)', in Buton and Guillon, *Les Pouvoirs en France à la libération*, pp. 38–59; for Belgium, see Wilfried Beerten, *Le Rêve Travailleuse en Belgique. Histoire de l'Union Démocratique Belge, 1944–1947* (Brussels, 1990); for the Netherlands, see Jan Bank, *Opkomst en ondergang van de Nederlandse Volksbeweging* (Deventer, 1978).

of all, did it function? After all, not every citizen, not every political family had the same war record, and those who could claim greater merit were unlikely to allow any expropriation of the resistance merit to the benefit of the nation collectively. The national epic could be a factor of unity only to the extent that such people failed to assert their claims. In this narration, the country had experienced an external aggression, it had suffered collectively and it had resisted, everyone according to his or her own means, collectively. The internal gradations in patriotism – who had resisted more or earlier, who had suffered more – were then secondary. A truly national epic required some form of expropriation of the resistance merits of those groups or individuals that had been more inclined to perilous actions, had taken greater risks, paid a heavier price. The success of a political consensus on the occupation period depended to a large extent on the weakness of the *milieux de mémoire*, those groups that had been more involved in the major events of the national epic, which were capable of incarnating the collective memory of the war. If they were allowed, encouraged or used to display their claims, the effect would disturb the consensus. Instead of some collectively worshipped consensual image of the past, there would be commemorative rivalry and a perpetual settling of historical scores.

The Netherlands provide an example of consensual commemoration, thanks to a consistent policy of the post-war political coalition to limit all kinds of commemorative activism, with only marginal opposition. Government and affiliated elites were the main agents of memory. Belgium and France, on the other hand, are examples of disruptive memories, where contests over wartime merit became a favourite weapon in post-war political confrontations. In Belgium, the polemic over the legacy of the resistance was the reverse side of the polemic over the 'royal question': the war record of individuals, institutions and political parties became one of the major battlefields of post-war history. In France, reference to the war years provided a crucial legitimisation for General De Gaulle, the French Communist Party and the governments that tried to steer the country between these two forces. In both countries there was a tradition of veterans' patriotism. In the interwar years, veterans' leagues had been important political actors, second only to the trade unions and the political parties themselves in membership figures and militancy. In France, veterans' leagues fuelled both fascist militias like La Rocque's Croix de Feu and fervently republican and pacifist movements.<sup>15</sup> In Belgium, veterans of the First World War also

<sup>15</sup> See Robert Soucy, *French Fascism. The Second Wave, 1933–1939* (New Haven, 1996); Antoine Prost, *Les Anciens Combattants* (Paris, 1977); and Prost, 'The Impact of War on French and German Political Cultures', *Historical Journal* 37 (1994), pp. 209–17.

animated not only the fascist wing of the Flemish movement and its democratic and pacifist wing but also the hard core of Belgian patriotism.<sup>16</sup> *Milieux de mémoire* had a natural authority in politics and, from the First World War, had inherited organisations, rituals, a discourse and a whole set of legal dispositions – from medals to priority employment – to emulate.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, G. Provoost, *De Vossen, 60 jaar Verbond van Vlaamse Oud-Strijders (1917–1979)* (Brussels, 1979).